DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 263 CS 510 315

AUTHOR Meyer, John C.
TITLE The Symbolic Role of Organizational Message Artifacts in a Communication System Assessment.
PUB DATE 2000-04-01
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern States Communication Association (New Orleans, LA, March 29-April 2, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Audits; Ethnography; *Evaluation Methods; *Hermeneutics; Higher Education; Observation; *Organizational Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Communications Behavior; *Symbolic Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper calls for the inclusion of narrative, thematic, and metaphor analysis as organizational assessment or communication audit methods and discusses some practical means of integrating these symbolic interpretational devices. The paper begins by defining the notion of symbol as the message content important to the organizational member. It then discusses four assessment methodologies: (1) textual analysis, or hermeneutics; (2) symbolic interactionism, or examining roles within organizations; (3) ethnomethodology, which examines construction of knowledge through interaction; and (4) phenomenology, which explores conscious experience. The paper continues by emphasizing three basic methods: observation, questioning, and transcribing organizational text. The paper concludes that, by practicing these methods, researchers will provide more compelling and deeper assessments of organizations. (Contains 16 references.) (EF)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 441 263

THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL MESSAGE ARTIFACTS IN A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

John C. Meyer

University of Southern Mississippi

Presented at the Southern States Communication Association
Annual Convention
New Orleans, LA

April 1, 2000

CONTACT:
John Meyer
University of Southern Mississippi
Box 5131 Speech Communication
Hattiesburg, MS 39406--5131
(601) 266-4280
John.Meyer@usm.edu

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John C. Meyer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 510 315

THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL MESSAGE ARTIFACTS IN A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

John Meyer

I often picture an organization member asking me, "What does ethnography have to do with us?" or "What good will something called 'narrative analysis' do when I just want to improve our communication here?" I have not heard these exact questions, but I have heard their sentiment from organization members. Even many who are fairly sophisticated about and interested in communication look for the nuts-and-bolts kind of quantified data on communication flow and satisfaction that are typical and important parts of organizational assessments. We who teach about what were called communication audits and what now seem best described as organizational assessments are left with the dilemma of what methods to teach our students in connection with such studies. Should we stick with the "nuts-and-bolts" survey and interview methods? The answer is clearly "no." Even in the heyday of communication audits using sophisticated quantitative methods, auditors found that stories obtained from the members surveyed sparked the most discussion among managers when they reported their results (Faules, 1982). While methods of organizational assessment have been refined, improved, and branched out in several directions, the "fuzzy methods," like narrative analysis, thematic analysis, metaphor analysis, and other forms of symbolic interpretation of organizational messages still get short shrift as organizational assessment methods. This essay calls for their inclusion in organizational assessments and discusses some practical ways to do so.

Part of the ambivalence about methods of study like narrative or metaphor analysis is understandable. Such methods of getting deep into the symbolism of organizations generally take more time, effort, and expenditure than a practical-minded organization seeking to improve its communication has the patience for. On the other hand, the symbols that make up the day-to-day life world of communicators in organizations are crucial for understanding it. Organizational message artifacts take on a special importance for organizational assessment, as they represent the day-to-day sense making actions of organizational members. Some effort must be made to understand organizational symbols, and there really are some practical, efficient ways to do this.

First, one must define and limit the notion of "symbol." Often, "symbol" can be used to denote the content of any and all messages found in organizations, and hence the study of them must refer to <u>any</u> study of communication in organizations. Here, I am invoking the term "organizational symbol" to refer to message content which is important to the organizational member, rather than to the researcher or assessor. Thus a "message artifact" is a symbol produced by an organization member, not the researcher. The researcher takes the message artifact and assesses or analyzes it, but it is not created by the researcher. This is a somewhat different approach from a common organizational assessment where one has a survey or set of questions in mind, administers them to find out how this particular organization's members respond, and then analyzes how the organization fits the researcher's symbol system. The alternative--and complementary--approach is to take symbols found in the discourse of organization members, and analyze those directly. The danger of survey approaches is that they presume we know what we want to ask before we enter an organization. This may be an excellent way to diagnose common problems or compare one organization with others, but it may prevent seeing new, unique, effective, or problematic forms of symbol use in an organization.

With surveys, "the research task becomes essentially one of measurement, not of discovery" (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, p. 121). Surveys and similar methods certainly have their place in organizational assessment, and should continue to have such a key place. But what of discovery? What of simply exploring symbols found and used in an organization?

Even the earliest communication audits found ways to tap this "phenomenological" or "experiential" level of organizational symbols. The International Communication Association Audit (Goldhaber, Yates, Porter, & Lesniak, 1978), put together in the early 1970s, included a form for subjects to fill out "critical communication incidents": one instance each of what the subject considered good and poor communication. While this had the potential to generate a rich set of data in the form of narratives, there seemed to be uncertainty about what to do with all of that data, other then letting it serve to illustrate the results of the more statistically powerful survey data. Yet a rich trove of understanding awaits one gathering more of the interpretive data from organizations, including narratives, metaphors, unique vocabulary, rituals, and organizational texts. What all this data can do is provide detailed observations of organizational members in action using symbols, and interviews can further provide organizational members accounting for their actions. The resulting "symbolic picture" of the organization provided for its own members can be the most effective catalyst for understanding the organization--and deciding whether and how to change it.

In an article seeking to increase awareness of varied research paradigms for organizational communication research, Putnam (1982) also suggested alternative methodologies to consider. "In effect," she noted, "the stories, myths, rituals, ceremonies, and nonverbal objects of the organizational culture inventory a pre-existing objective structure" (p. 199). While Putnam goes on to describe alternatives to viewing organizations as objective structures, usually

at a practical level that is what assessors and interested organization members seek to find out--"What is going on with our communication structure?" She mentions several methodologies that have not been much used but could be well-used during organizational assessments.

Textual analysis (or "hermeneutics") looks at documents or transcripts one obtains from organizations. This could be from interviews, answers written out on surveys, interviews, or observed and transcribed messages from observations within the organization. Metaphors and narratives will emerge from such analysis, answering questions like: How do organization members see themselves? How do they see co-workers? How do they view management? In conceptualizing their own organization and having that conception "fed back" to them through an organizational assessment, members will receive practical insights into their own organizational communication.

Symbolic interactionism seeks to understand one's dramatic role, and looks for who is playing what roles in the organization. Organizations are dramas which are enacted through communication, and assessors need to assess and categorize the parts played and the symbols members invoke to play them. Deal and Kennedy (1982) and Pacanowsky (1988) categorized organizational members into roles in quite memorable fashion. The former noted storytellers, priests, whisperers, gossips, spies, and cabals in organizational networks. The latter found associates, sponsors, and credible leaders seeking to enact a lattice structure in a clothing production organization. An organizational assessment which gathered data and allowed such characterizations of members would provide useful feedback and discussion points among members. For instance, they might ask, "Are these roles we want enacted in our organization? Are people filling these roles at the expense of roles we would rather have them fill?" and "Are there some roles we should promote more enactment of?"

Third, ethnomethodology seeks to understand how people construct their common-sense knowledge through interaction. An observer can analyze interaction and pick out some qualities of it that participants do not perceive due to taking-it-for granted or never really thinking about their interaction. The key here is to discover the folkways of organization members and reflect them in constructed narrative. Most children love to hear stories with themselves as characters within them. Organization members are no different, unless it turns out they are villains of the piece! Yet, if they are villains, is that not what a good organizational assessment should make clear? How are members recreating the organization each day through their communication? What is their story? Ethnomethodological elements of organizational assessments seek to tell the story of communication within the organization as members invoke symbols.

Fourth and finally, phenomenology concentrates on the conscious experience of individuals. A study from this perspective would ask individual members of an organization to describe experiences and feelings during an interval of communication there. Alternatively, a researcher could participate in organizational activity, whether as a customer or temporary employee, and try to describe what the experience was like in terms of feelings and an experiential narrative.

In short, a focus on assessment of organizational symbols in messages requires extra stress on three basic methods: observation, questioning, and transcribing organizational text. We must observe, interview, and transcribe--those are the primary methods of interpretive research and will provide a "spin" toward organizational symbols emerging from assessors' data. To understand organizational symbols, regardless of the theory one is testing or the agenda one follows, one must always recur to the text (Deetz, 1982). Witmer (1997) enacted this advice in her study of Alcoholics Anonymous. She observed meetings, conducted interviews with

members, and reviewed her transcripts and other texts created by the organization. While many of these methods are familiar parts of organizational assessments, the application of these methods are taken further with an interpretive or ethnomethodological approach. Not only did Witmer (1997) assess organizational messages, but she looked at the symbol-use which held the organization together. She used extensive data analysis to do this, as well, so let it not be said that such methods of symbol analysis are easier or merely seek to bypass extensive quantitative analysis!

Naturalistic observation is key to understanding organizational symbols (Sypher, Applegate, & Sypher, 1985). This is the method which is often given short shrift in organizational assessments. The quick and practical surveying of members and interviewing a sample of them are generally favored. Still, even in the limited time frame of typical organizational assessments, more time should be spent "in the field." Even a day or two inside an organization can provide an "experiential text" to analyze which can then be triangulated with surveys and interviews. Critics of ethnographic studies, while lauding their goals, have claimed that most of the concerns which bedevil traditional organizational research also must be addressed in symbolic study (Emerson, 1987). They need conceptualization and theoretical focus; rather than too much reliance on results "emerging" from the data. They must attend to meanings of symbols recognized by those under study; the organization members. Ethnographers cannot simply tell their own story without some kind of check of the perceptions of members. Finally, symbolic studies must specify the actual textual practices that produced the data; the methodology must be clearly documented (Emerson, 1987). All of these are concerns with assessments anyway, and they are not avoided or prevented by focusing on interpretive or ethnomethodological symbol-study.

Interviews have long been used in audits, and their use does not dramatically change in interpretive research. The transcripts are simply subjected to more in-depth, thematic analysis. Printed texts generated by the organization can then take their place alongside the other texts generated by observation notes and transcribed interviews. Thematic analysis of all three texts will give greater insight into organizational symbolism. Typically, assessors read through such texts, seeking themes, using a constant comparison method of all data with one another, gradually categorizing the data into themes which emerge. (Such procedures are detailed in Glaser & Strauss [1967] and Miles and Huberman [1984]). The themes can then be encapsulated by short phrases, narratives, or metaphors to provide a perspective to report back to the organization's members.

Another issue that comes up is how to report one's results. Standard assessment reports are typically statistic-heavy, table-laden, with lots of "bulleted" conclusions or suggestions. Yet as mentioned earlier, it is a narrative that one worker told--or in a stronger case, the narrative the assessor tells--that will really spark discussion and potential change among organization members. One can report such results in the traditional way, as an authoritative account that anyone in a similar situation would have given of the organization's communication (Van Maanen, 1988). Such an objective, scientific approach often fits the style of report organization members may expect. One could also push the envelope of reporting, however. A "confessional tale" tells of the experiences of the researcher as he or she encountered the culture, in an attempt to dramatize the "discovery" of the organization's culture. The assessor thus demonstrates some empathy with organizational members, and they in turn can relate to someone experiencing what they experience on a daily basis. Finally, an "impressionist tale" tells in great detail about incidents in the organization which the investigator instigated or participated in. The report

almost becomes an autobiography of key events in the researcher's experience participating in the organization. This can be highly dramatic and spark terrific reconceptualization on the part of members about their communication, but it may also be written off by members as too nonconformist with the expected tone of an assessment report.

Culture is a shared understanding among organization members; the true goal of a symbolic analysis is to penetrate the surface or superficial manifestations of that culture, to provide a deeper understanding of the organization and its symbol-use (Bryman, 1991). Seeking out organizational symbols through observation, questioning, and a focus on text will "dig deeper" and provide more compelling assessments of organizational communication. Along with such attempts at interpretation, it is worth remembering that any assessor will be biased in some way. Social research always serves someone's interests, it has been pointed out (Jermier, 1991). The assessor must be aware of these interests and up-front about them in reports. Typically, assessments occur at the will of organizational management, so there is a natural bias toward that perspective. An assessor may also have his or her own preference for how an organization should be structured for communication. Generally, rather than feigning disinterest or complete objectivity, researchers should acknowledge their perspectives or biases and argue for them--or acknowledge that particular biases may be affecting their account in the assessment report. As much as we may attempt to triangulate our data, we by necessity start from our own perspective. Indeed, laying out that perspective and inviting alternative perspectives from organization members or other outsiders could further enhance and make insightful an assessment. After all, that is what we are seeking in understanding often taken-for-granted symbol use by organization members.

Such data provide direct access to the "web" spun by organizations as their culture, and

thus to the communicated values espoused by an organization. Managers and all organizational members can become culturally aware, which is not an easy task--since culture is "taken for granted, implicit, and pervasive. It is the air that every organizational member breathes" (Sackmann, 1990, p. 139). As such, it can be a most enlightening exercise to have a consultant or assessor provide an "outside" or "objective" picture of the cultural web with surrounds members to such a degree that they may become unaware of it. The "moral" of my story today is: We must find ways, during an organizational assessment, to incorporate subject-generated, symbolic data into the study, and respond with researcher-generated symbols for the organization members' consideration. Through narrative, thematic, and metaphorical analysis of data obtained by extended observation, questioning, and reviewing texts from organizations, we will provide more compelling and deeper assessments of organizations, even within the naturally limited time-spans such projects necessitate.

REFERENCES

Bryman, A. (1991). Street Corner Society as a model for research into organizational culture. In P. J. Frost, L. F. Moore, M. R. Louis, C. C. Lundberg, & J. Martin (Eds.), Reframing organizational culture (pp. 205-214). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Deal, T. E., & Kennedy, A. A. (1982). Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Deetz, S. A. (1982). Critical interpretive research in organizational communication. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46, 131-149.

Emerson, R. M. (1987). Four ways to improve the craft of field work. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 16, 69-89.

Faules, D. (1982) The use of multi-methods in the organizational setting. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46, 150-161.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies of qualitative research. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Goldhaber, G., Yates, M., Porter, D., & Lesniak, R. (1978). Organizational communication: State of the art. Human Communication Research, 5, 76-96.

Jermier, J. M. (1991). Critical epistemology and the study of organizational culture: Reflections on Street Corner Society. In P. J. Frost, L. F. Moore, M. R. Louis, C. C. Lundberg, & J. Martin (Eds.), Reframing organizational culture (pp. 223-233). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Qualitative data analysis. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Pacanowsky, M. (1988). Communication in the empowering organization. In Albrecht, T. L. (Ed.), Communication Yearbook 11. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Pacanowsky, M. E., & O'Donnell-Trujillo, N. (1982). Communication and organizational cultures. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46, 115-130.

Putnam, L. L. (1982). Paradigms for organizational communication research: An overview and synthesis. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46, 192-206.

Sackmann, S. A. (1990). Managing organizational culture: Dreams and possibilities. In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), Communication Yearbook 13. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sypher, B. D., Applegate, J. L., & Sypher, H. E. (1985). Culture and communication in organizational contexts. In W. B. Gudykunst, L. Stewart, & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), Communication, culture, and organizational processes (pp. 13-29). Beverly Hills: Sage.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). Tales of the field: On writing ethnography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Witmer, D. F. (1997). Communication and recovery: Structuration as an ontological approach to organizational culture. Communication Monographs, 64, 324-349.